

# A Transformed Society – a Different Jesus?

---

*by András Reuss, Hungary*

*Printed in: Discovering Jesus in Our Place. Contextual Christologies in a Globalised World. Edited by Sturla J. Stalsett. ISPCK: Delhi, 2003. 180 pp. 66-79.*

Writers are debating whether January 1st of the year 2000 or of the year 2001 is to be considered the first day of the 21st century. We, in Hungary, are living in a unique situation overshadowing the excitement of a new millennium: a profound social and political change in our society. This change has consequences also for the situation of the church and the individual Christians. It is really a profound change. Not very often in history has one generation had the chance to see two so different contexts as socialism and capitalism, collectivist and liberal society.

What is the impact of this change on the image of Jesus in our context? Has Jesus got a new image after the change? If he has, is Jesus still the same? What is the relationship between the images of Jesus and our identity?

The following study is based on articles printed in church publications to Christmas or Easter, using formulations of the respective authors mostly. For the first chapter articles from the period of 1969-1975, for the second one articles from the period of 1994-1999 – 25 years later – are taken into consideration.

## 1. The Image of Jesus in the Trials of Socialism in Hungary

In the following an attempt will be made to outline the characteristics of two images of Jesus in the Marxian socialism of Hungary. The first image used to be the counterpoint to

the second image. Here, the latter will be presented more thoroughly through five different features of the same image.

A. The first image was based on the preaching of Jesus the **Redeemer**, in the same way as the revival movements and evangelistic campaigns had been preaching this in pre-war times. This preaching had two dimensions.

Firstly, Jesus was seen as the personal Redeemer of the individual. Jesus strengthens his ones, he is the rescue in any kind of turmoil of life and world. He will not leave his ones alone and he will protect them in any changes of the world and the society. «Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever» (Hebrews 13,8). So don't worry about yourself, don't worry about the world, just be faithful to the Lord, he takes care of you.

Secondly, the global aspects of the redemption in Christ were articulated. The salvation by Christ was for the whole world,<sup>1</sup> and he was in the world through his disciples, e.g. through his church present.<sup>2</sup> This links the believer with all human beings.<sup>3</sup>

This first image refused to deal concretely with problems of the world. It did not enhance the dialogue between the church and the society. So the world remained strange for the Christians. They only had to lift up their eyes to Jesus and all problems would be solved.

By this image of Jesus the self-appreciation of the Christians and the church was strengthened. The church was able not to see itself as existing by the grace of the socialist and atheistic regime. Christ was present and acting today too. As a peculiarity of the time, no differentiation was made between the church and the work of Jesus.

Even when work was put into drawing a timely image of Jesus and expressing it in the wording of the time, the effort to be faithful to the biblical message was overwhelming.

B. The second image of Jesus in socialist Hungary can be presented through five different features.

1) Weaknesses, failures and omissions in the tragical past (until 1945) were seen as

---

1 Szerdahelyi Pál, A bezárkóztak között. Evangélikus Élet XXXIX/15. 1974. április 14.

2 Káldy Zoltán, ...Lakott közöttünk. Evangélikus Élet XXXVI/52. 1971. december 26.

3 Koren Emil, Húsvéti templomozók. Evangélikus Élet XXXIV/14, 1969. április 6. – Veöreös Imre, Nagypéntek ünnepe – 1971. Evangélikus Élet XXXVI/15. 1971. április 11.

the responsibility not only of all human beings but mainly of Christians. Jesus calls to **repentance**. This is also an integral part of the evangelistic witness. The root cause of evil and injustice was the selfishness of human beings whether in the case of the Prophet Jonah at Ninive, or in the Vietnam war and Middle East of the early sixties, or in families of the present. All these were put into the same basket together with the Hungarian cooperation with Nazi Germany and participation in the second World War against the Soviets.<sup>4</sup>

It is interesting to observe that criticism in church publications, if there were any, was almost without exception directed against Christianity.<sup>5</sup> Jesus was interpreted as calling first of all his own people to repent. If they did repent the call could be told others. It was seen as a great problem of church history in general that much was spoken about Christ without leading people to act according to his words. Christians had not taken seriously enough the poverty of the people and the injustice they had to suffer.<sup>6</sup> So, according to this view, there was no place to say a word against communists and **atheists** and their weaknesses, mistakes or omissions.<sup>7</sup>

It would not be possible to find many explicit evidences in church publications that Jesus was meant as siding with the socialist world. Still, as problems of the world and issues to repent only those perceived to be found mostly in the Western part of the world were mentioned. Often the different issues in society were understood in their official Eastern European interpretation because the words and phrases of the official media were simply adopted unaltered and without reservation or explanation. Problems or weaknesses of the socialist society were not (and could not be) discussed until initial attempts in the late seventies.

The preaching of repentance, an important feature of Christianity in general and the ecumenical movement of the post-war world in special, became not only a means of sound self-criticism but implicitly a cause of stupid blindness and flattering conformity towards a regime that was not at all perfect.

2) The socialist society's present was regarded as a judgement/ **punishment** of God on his people because they had been disobedient, i.e. they had not lived and served in the former social system according to the will of Christ. This is on the lines of the preaching of

---

4 Selmeczi János, Szabadulás új életre. Jónás 2,3-10. Evangélikus Élet XXXV/13. 1970. március 29.

5 Koren Emil, 1Kor 5,6-8. Húsvét vasárnapja. Lelkipásztor (41) 1966/2, 126-129.

6 Káldy Zoltán, Karácsony diakóniája. Evangélikus Élet XXXVIII /51. 1973. december 23.

7 Káldy Zoltán, Arany és szalma. Evangélikus Élet XXXIV/14, 1969. április 6.

the Old Testament prophets. All this with or without knowing of the gulags, persecution, execution, restriction of human rights, and socialization of even small people's small private property.

3) Christ nevertheless was seen as the **Liberator**. He had often been preached in a bold although funny or strange parallelism: As Christ, by his death and resurrection, had liberated us from sin, he had given us a new chance to survive in the present, to live and to flourish in a society which had come to exist without and in spite of the mistakes and unjust structures of the prior society. The putting down the old nature and the putting on the new nature (Eph 4,22) was illustrated by the fall of the prior society and by the establishing of the new socialist one, while the real becoming a Christian would imply having a positive relationship to this new society. To get freed from sin was sometimes described as a new beginning after an unjust society, a beginning that would bring about a better and just society, i.e. the socialist society. It can hardly be stated that this kind of illustration would have been convenient for many. The communists did not need this kind of back-up as they could get on without religion and without supported by the church. Many Christians, even if they did accept the call to repentance because of the role of Christianity in the past, did not believe that the existence of socialist society could be seen in such a close connection with the liberating Lord Jesus. Rather they felt humiliated as they understood this kind of parallelism as a way of legitimating the atheistic counterpart.

Liberation, however, was meant as the possibility of a new life and the hope that the efforts for a better life and for the benefit of the world would not be in vain.<sup>8</sup> Human beings were not confined to live in resignation demonstrated by the extremely high percentage of suicide.<sup>9</sup> Because of this hope human life was possible on earth in general and in Hungary in special. This encouragement used to be comfort for the sorely tired in trials of post-war social changes on the one hand, and affirmation of the new society in its adventures of social engineering and autocracy on the other hand.

To many Christians Easter and the Resurrection of Christ had only to do with heaven and eternity with no significance for the earth and the everyday life of people here. The root of contradiction of the Christian existence was lying in ourselves: Christ was not bearing rule over us as we, his people, were still living in hatred, without being able to forgive one another, taking social property, and – in the time of the goulash-communism of

<sup>8</sup> Nagy Gyula, Krisztus feltámadása – mai hittel. Evangélikus Élet XXXVI/15. 1971. április 11.

<sup>9</sup> Káldy Zoltán, Húsvét ünnepe. 1Kor 5,6-8. Lelkipásztor (50) 1975/2, 121-123.

the seventies – seeking after earthly/material goods.<sup>10</sup>

4) Jesus used to be understood as the **Servant**, in the sense of Matthew 20,28: «even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.» Following his example the church and Christians should not declare their rights and not insist on their privileges in society but be servants of God for the benefit of the people. This idea rejected that the first task was to try to improve the situation of Christians and to enlarge the permitted radius of the activities of the Church.

It would be a misunderstanding to see this as a total submission. Between the two alternatives – either to achieve liberty for the church first and develop contacts afterwards, or to cooperate with the socialist state first and then try to attain to allowances – the possibility of a free choice was not given. As the word 'cooperation' has the suspicious synonym 'collaboration' it has not been easy to argue for the latter strategy. The question was, however, and it was put in the same manner not only in the Eastern European socialist context: is Jesus somebody whose place in society must be somehow guaranteed in order to enable his presence, or is he powerful enough to gain his place among us and in our world, in spite of any kind of human resistance?

The consequence of this image of Jesus can not be anything but serving. Not expecting outer support, neither from the law, nor from agreements between state and church, nor from the solidarity of sister-churches, Christians must be disciples of Jesus, love even enemies (Matthew 5,44) and love one another, since «by this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another» (John 13,35).

The idea of a Christian life as service or diakonia was by no means an invention of the theology in socialist times. There were a good many people in church history who meant that service was a central feature of the church and the Christian.<sup>11</sup> And, if Jesus

---

<sup>10</sup> Dóka Zoltán, Húsvét ünnepe. 1Kor 5,6-8. Húsvét a földön! *Lelkipásztor* (50) 1975/2, 119-120.

<sup>11</sup> Luther phrased his second proposition in “The Freedom of a Christian»: “A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.» (Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings. Edited by Timothy F. Lull. Foreword by Jaroslav Pelikan. Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1989. 596 p.) 1663 Comenius summarized real Christianity as service (Johannes Amos Comenius, *A világ útvesztője és a szív paradicsoma*. [1663] Fordította Dobossy László, Mayer Judit. II. kiadás. Bibliaiskolák Közössége: Budapest, 1990. XXXIX. és XLIII. fejezet (167., 179-180). See the WCC Assembly 1961 in New Delhi (c.f. Masao Takenaka, *Zu dienen berufen. Der Dienst der Kirche in der sich wandelnden Welt von heute*. **In:** *Jesus Christus das Licht der Welt. Bericht über die Dritte Vollversammlung des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen Neu-Delhi 1961*. Herausgegeben von Gerhard Brennecke. Evangelische Verlagsanstalt: Berlin, 1963. 496 S. 170-180.) as well as at the LWF Assembly 1957 in Minneapolis (Edgar Carlson, *Befreit zum Dienst in der Welt*. In *Offizieller Bericht der Dritten Vollversammlung des Lutherischen Weltbundes*. Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA 15-25. August 1957. Evang. Presseverband für Bayern: München, 1958. 244 S. 77-87.).

said, «A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; ...»<sup>12</sup> (John 15,20), the church and the Christian might not expect more in the world. All this lead to the conviction that Christian service in the world would be appreciated by the world. The conduct of individual Christians as well as of the local congregations and of the whole of the Lutheran Church in Hungary could not be seen as private business in the socialist society as it either promoted or destroyed the Christian witness in the world.<sup>12</sup> Christ sends his disciples into the world to be freed from sin, to take the fear of death and to live in acting love to fellow-men.<sup>13</sup> It was because of Christ that it made sense to engage ourselves in efforts for the good of the world.<sup>14</sup> The task was to preach that a new beginning is possible.<sup>15</sup>

It is not difficult to tell the areas where Christian service could be accomplished, according the thinking of that time. Christians should be for peace in the world, for social justice, for just sharing, for the third world countries, for the benefit of mankind and fellow men, for the family, and for the sufferer. They should be against war, poverty and racial discrimination. This list or part of it was mentioned in any public appearance of the church. Its usage seems not to have been a strict and expressed rule, but it was somehow in the air and atmosphere that these phrases were to be used. I am sure that this was a list acceptable as agenda for people believing in Jesus. As a simple list, however, without reservation or explanation, it meant tasks only elsewhere, in countries far away, only in social systems different from the socialist one in Hungary at that time. There were individual differences in using this list: some used even more phrases and made the impression that they were on the official line to a greater extend than others; some tried to use its words with explanation or reservation; others again made attempts to smuggle in words not on the list.<sup>16</sup> If I call this interaction of author, editor and censorship a 'guerrilla-war', it would be an overstatement. If I compare it with the game hide-and-seek, it would be an understatement. I am wondering whether there was anybody of us who was able to fight faultlessly.

It can hardly be believed that authors in the socialist system were really convinced that they had drawn an opportune image of Jesus in this way. Rather they may have believed that they had managed to be opportune in a manner that met the outer

---

12 Káldy Zoltán, Húsvét ünnepe. 1Kor 5,6-8. Lelkipásztor (50) 1975/2, 121-123. – Káldy Zoltán, Az emberi méltóságról van szó. Evangélikus Élet XXXV/52. 1970. december 27.

13 Ottlyk Ernő, Krisztus halála. Evangélikus Élet XXXVIII/16. 1973. április 22.

14 Nagy Gyula, Krisztus feltámadása – mai hittel. Evangélikus Élet XXXVI/15. 1971. április 11.

15 Csizmazia Sándor, Húsvét ünnepe. 1Kor 5,6-8. Lelkipásztor 1982/3, 175-177.

16 This attempt is documented by Dóka Zoltán: «Helyreigazítás». Lelkipásztor (73) 1998/7-8, 320. He hardly was the only one in this effort.

expectations of the authorities. Neither can it be believed that the authorities could be convinced of the church representatives' loyalty by such platitudes. Nevertheless, this was enough to refer to such a loyalty in public. So, at the first glance, the church seemed to be backing up of the socialist society almost without any reservation. Time was needed to be able to articulate and to hear that in this reiterating of expected phrases the Christians did include a different and deeper understanding too, and that the point of view of the church could not be the same as that of the communists.

In the work of making an image of Jesus relevant to the time being, one can also find evidences that a more appropriate view of human efforts and deeds had been articulated. It was stated that even if the Golden Age or the time of complete peace would be achieved and all material and social problems solved, the Gospel of Christ would still be necessary. Even the society of planned and expected future that human beings are striving for would be in want of the peace which could be given only by the reconciliation in Christ.<sup>17</sup>

5) The image of Jesus as Servant and his following as service could be understood on the one hand as if Jesus was weak and the world had the power over the church and the Christians, and on the other hand as if the lifestyle of serving would mean the giving up of oneself. Against these misinterpretations another phrase was developed: Jesus Christ is **Lord and Servant**.<sup>18</sup>

The lordship of Jesus was understood as his ruling over this world, even over the socialist society. The fact of the engagement even of non-Christians in efforts for humanistic goals<sup>19</sup> was seen as one of the tokens of Jesus' power. There were cases when non-Christians were considered as the ones who give a good example for Christians' service and behaviour. This was possible because of the high ideals of Marxian socialist theory. Of course, Jesus too had shocked his listeners by saying «the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you» (Matthew 21,31). May be there used to be some tiny difference.

---

17 Káldy Zoltán, *És az emberszivé? Evangélikus Élet* XXXVII/52, 1972. december 24.

18 Káldy Zoltán, *Jézus Krisztus - Úr és szolga*. (Presentation at the Executive Committee Meeting of the Lutheran World Federation in Amsterdam, August 17-21, 1975.) In Káldy Zoltán, *A diakónia útján. A Magyarországi Evangélikus Egyház Sajtóosztálya*: Budapest, 1979. 185 old. 78-97. – Also published: *Lelkipásztor* (51) 1976/1, 8-20. See also: Masao Takenaka, *Zu dienen berufen. Der Dienst der Kirche in der sich wandelnden Welt von heute. Jesus Christus das Licht der Welt. Bericht über die Dritte Vollversammlung des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen Neu-Delhi 1961*. Herausgegeben von Gerhard Brennecke. Evangelische Verlagsanstalt: Berlin, 1963. 496 S. 170-180.

19 Káldy Zoltán, *Az emberi méltóságról van szó. Evangélikus Élet* XXXV/52. 1970. december 27.

One should weigh this second image of Jesus not simply as a compromise with Marxist-socialist ideology and socio-political reality. The efforts to encourage the Christians and the church – after the disappointment and lethargy of shocking changes due to a lost war and to a partly necessary, partly violent profound social transformation – to be active and to participate in the social and political fields are also to be taken seriously. Participation was, of course, possible only within the limits of the circumstances of a totalitarian regime. Looking back today it can be said that on the one hand the society had changed and the churches had **step by step** got better conditions for their ministry. But, on the other hand, they were also used by the society as assistants in its hands.

This second image of Jesus, featured above in five paragraphs, tried to face the problems of the contemporary world, which used to be the socialist regime in Hungary, and to get into dialogue with it. A dangerous undertaking we must without exaggeration say today. I try to recall the problem I had that time: how should I follow Jesus, the Lord and Servant, the Crucified and Resurrected, with a responsible life in thoughts and deeds in a mixture of hope for a better world and of a gruesome shamelessness and autocracy?

## 2. The Image of Jesus after the Trials of Socialism in Hungary

The year of change 1990, with the first free elections since 1948, also changed the perspective. The past now is no more the time before 1945, but before 1990. Hungary celebrated its millennium 1996. With 1000 years of Christianity the 40 years of socialism is just a short episode. In these 1000 years weaknesses, failures and omissions of the Christians and the church can be traced. There were several tragical moments and grave trials. The only constant of this history is Jesus Christ. His word has been preached, in his name people have got absolution, and it ~~would not be~~ **was not** without consequences if his will was neglected. After 40 years of restrictions the church has got free. All the plans and hopes of an immediate burial of Christianity have failed. He is alive in the midst of this world, although secularization is going on. The word of Jesus is still able to touch people of our times.<sup>20</sup>

As a conclusion to this, the situation after 1990 is considered by several people as a victory of Christ. I think this is a dangerous consideration. In the thoughts of many it implies the victory of the church and of the Christians. This implies that they are good and

---

20 Frenkl Róbert, Hamis krisztusok és a Krisztus. Evangélikus Élet LXII/51. 1996. december 22.

successful whereas the other part of the world is bad and wrong. This makes the nuanced and thoroughgoing search of the past unnecessary, and the cheap self-approvals, 'We had to suffer' or 'The others were bad, we did the best we could', acceptable.

Today, ten years after the change, the gap between the promised gifts of Christ and the reality of Christian life can also be observed.<sup>21</sup> The voices which claimed that Christianity could prove the authenticity of Jesus sound lower and lower.

Jesus is the one who is still in front of us. He leads us from the weaknesses, failures, omissions as well as from the pains and injustice suffered in the past, from the despair and fear we are still burdened by to new possibilities. He leads and encourages us not to look backwards, but straight ahead<sup>22</sup> and he gives tasks for the present.<sup>23</sup> Jesus can provide the renewal that political and social programmes have not been able to provide; a new relationship to values and morality, and a renewed belief.<sup>24</sup>

It is clear to many people that after the regime of the Marxist, materialistic and atheistic ideology it is not the rule of Christ that has come. Rather, the regime of money is presenting itself as the solution for any need. The real human dimensions of life are getting overshadowed and losing their value in the eyes of many.<sup>25</sup>

In this context Jesus is preached as the one who strengthens his disciples to remain in faith. He is the one who helps against sin,<sup>26</sup> frees from fear,<sup>27</sup> and gives hope.<sup>28</sup> A new beginning is possible by the Gospel of Christ. He can create order in human life.<sup>29</sup> Mankind is not passively participating in this, but one should try to actualize the good wishes of Christianity's great holidays.<sup>30</sup> Christians should walk on the path of Christ and deal with the problems of society and peace in the world as every long journey begins with the very first step.<sup>31</sup>

The preaching of Jesus after the socialism limits itself to questions of the

---

21 Cserháti Sándor, Ámde ... Evangélikus Élet LXIII/15. 1998. április 12.

22 Gáncs Péter, "Előttetek megyek Galileába..." "Mi mindig mindenről elkésünk..." Evangélikus Élet LXIV/14. 1999. április 4.

23 Gáncs Péter, "Előttetek megyek Galileába..." "Mi mindig mindenről elkésünk..." Evangélikus Élet LXIV/14. 1999. április 4.

24 Bácskai Károly, Új világosság. 1Kor 5,6-8. Húsvét ünnepe. in Tükörcép, 1998. 123-127.

25 Frenkl Róbert, Hamis krisztusok és a Krisztus. Evangélikus Élet LXII/51. 1996. december 22.

26 Cserháti Sándor, Isten válasza. Evangélikus Élet LIX /14. 1994. április 3.

27 Szeverényi János, Íme, élek! Evangélikus Élet LXI/14. 1996. április 7.

28 Cserháti Sándor, Ámde ... Evangélikus Élet LXIII/15. 1998. április 12.

29 Lupták György, Íme, az Isten! Evangélikus Élet LX/16. 1995. április 16.

30 Harmati Béla, Csecsemő a templomlépcsőn. Evangélikus Élet LXIII/51-52. 1998. december 20-27.

individual.<sup>32</sup> Only the question of personal faithfulness is raised, while neither burning issues of the wide world, nor problems of the country or the church, nor questionable ways of lifestyle are treated. Having no censorship of any kind any more this self-restriction is interesting enough. The cause cannot be the new situation as all the old problems have not been solved and new ones have turned up.

How can this self-limitation after socialism be explained? Christians might be cautious in pondering the various problems because of their attempt not to repeat their mistakes of the past. They seem to be reluctant in reiterating the old phrases or only phrases. Another reason might be that they are fascinated by the possibilities of the new era and blinded by its light. In the past it was somehow the command of the ruling power which inspired the words. The state power of today tries to promote the churches and their activities, and this inspiration, backed up also by a wide public opinion, is quite strong. Opposition to it can easily be understood as nostalgia and longing after the socialism gone.

So, a strong turn to inwardness can be observed. It is so because there is no agitation against it. It is also somehow the easier way as no dealing with the world seems to be necessary. There are problems enough within our own church, people say. So let us build up our own congregation, the world is too big for us. New religious movements and groups also push the so-called old churches to enter into competition with them more seriously than with the secular world and their challenges.

As we have now seen, the image of Jesus preached after the socialism in Hungary does not try to face the problems of the contemporary world, which is the democratic and capitalist regime in Hungary. The church is not really trying to get into dialogue with this new regime, at least not for the benefit of the society but first of all for her own benefit. It is still a dangerous undertaking to be Christian and to be responsible within the church because important questions will not be articulated. Maybe we do not even realize them.

In sum, the problem I am confronted with today ends up being **almost** the same as the one I had during the time of the socialist society. To repeat: how should I follow Jesus, the Lord and Servant, the Crucified and Resurrected, with a responsible life in thoughts

---

31 Harmati Béla, Reménység – csak azért is! Evangélikus Élet LIX/52. 1994. december 25.

32 Some exceptions: Frenkl Róbert, Hamis krisztusok és a Krisztus. Evangélikus Élet LXII/51. 1996. december 22. – Harmati Béla, Reménység – csak azért is! Evangélikus Élet LIX/52. 1994. december 25. – Harmati Béla, Csecsemő a templomlépcsőn. Evangélikus Élet LXIII/51-52. 1998. december 20-27.

and deeds in a mixture of hope for a better world and of a gruesome shamelessness and profiteering?

### 3. Redemption, New Creation and Relief

To me it is most disturbing that in the images of Jesus in the trials of socialism as well as after them the issues of the world appear only as wings of a theatre or as a collection of illustrations for sermons. It is as if the world were far away and not really concerning Christians, as if we were not the world, and as if Jesus, the Redeemer, would not have come «... to his own home, and his own people ...» (John 1,11).

If the time of socialism in Hungary can be caricatured as a cruel despot, then the time after the socialism would be sugar daddy next corner. I don't know whether the unbelief of the one was better than the belief of the other. I don't know whether our being frightened of the lack of liberty, on the one hand, is worse than the naivety of promised love, on the other. But I do know that it is quite dangerous not to recognize the problems today.

Jesus for me is the maker of a new creation (2 Corinthians 5,17). He has transformed the world (John 16,11). His transformation is re-creation (John 3,5; Ephesians 2,1ss). Jesus comforts in the way that he changes not simply the times and the shape of the world but also human beings. And by recreating human beings Jesus gives comfort and relief for the world. The kind of comfort and relief for the world can be identified only if we know Jesus and the world.